

FOLK DANCING AT INTERNATIONAL HOUSE IN CHICAGO

Charlotte Lewis Chen

Folk dancing at International House in Chicago is first of all for fun—a break in the busy days of the students, for relaxation and enjoyment.

About eighteen years ago there was a very active group of Bulgarian students, members of the International Students Association, the forerunner of International House, on the University of Chicago campus. Whenever they gathered there was singing and dancing—the songs and dances of the villages of their beloved Bulgaria. They, with a few other students, were the nucleus of the present International House Folk Dance Group. For some time they met at the home of two American sisters, students at the University, (they are the Lewis sisters, Charlotte Chen and Jerry Joris) who were intensely interested in things “folk” and who are today still vitally interested in the group and instrumental in its continuance. The number of dancers grew so rapidly that the dances were done in shifts for lack of space. When International HOUSE was completed and the International Students Association incorporated in its activities, the group was moved there where it has joyously danced ever since. It is the one activity that has continued uninterruptedly throughout the history of the House. Even during the military residency of the House facilities, when men students were few, when teachers and accompanists were being drafted, we danced, introducing the soldier residents to a form of the art new to most of them. During this period the Folk Dance Group and the Sunday teas were practically the only means of continuing activities for the foreign students in this vicinity.

In the early days there was no money for a professional teacher and instruction was given by the students themselves. This provoked many managerial problems—the securing of accompanists and proper music, often a research job, assuring the student teacher of his linguistic and dancing ability, and oftentimes teaching the dance by demonstration to an American who then taught the same in English—not always a successful undertaking. I remember one young German girl who, while teaching the “Broom Dance” became frightened at her own temerity in trying to teach in English, suddenly burst into tears and fled from the assembly. After considerable persuasion she finished the evening without further mishap. After the group had become firmly established at the House as a student activity, the Student Council, appreciating its contribution, assisted in obtaining a professional teacher, and from that time the group has been able out of its own funds to hire a teacher and accompanist. For the past ten years they have been thrice blessed by having as their teacher a man interested in folk lore from the very depths of his soul—Vytautas Finadar Beliajus, a Lithuanian. He is a very able teacher, an accomplished dancer, a recognized authority in the folk dance field, the author of several folk dance books, technical adviser for the preparation of record albums for folk dancing, and is the publisher of a folk lore magazine, “VILTIS.” His repertoire of dances reads like the United Nations roll call. He covers the world.

Several exhibition groups have done much in making friends for the Folk Dance Group and the House. One of the first was a Polish dance group under the direction of Thaddeus Malinowski, the only things Polish about it being the instructor and the dances, the dancers being from the Philippines, Scotland, Germany, Bulgaria, Hawaii, including also several white and negro Americans.

This group gave some very outstanding exhibitions, but the one I remember with the fondest memories was given at a very important Polish affair attended by hundreds of Polish people. A young man from the Philippines, a chap weighing less than ninety pounds, was chosen as the best “Polish” dancer on the floor. He had taken at least one phase of Polish culture and made it a part of himself. In later years the exhibition group under Mr. Beliajus came into being and has contributed much in the way of interpreting the cultures of other lands in the form of the dance. It has performed in churches and hospitals, for museums, women's clubs, schools, parent-teacher groups, and in festivals, having fun all along the way. Today the trend is away from exhibitions; audience participation is now being stressed. Regularly a group from the House dances at two mental hospitals where the patients are encouraged to take part. They show an interest not only in the dancing, but in where the dancers come from, what they do in their own countries, and though these people are mentally ill their interest is a healthy one, encouraging for the doctors as well as the dancers. No longer do we perform for the parent-teacher and school groups. We dance with them. Where the individual makes a personal effort, the cultural aspect of the dance is made more memorable, though little, if anything, is said about “culture” as such. For some of the Americans in these groups it is their first time to become actually acquainted with an international student. Oftentimes it thrills him. He asks a thousand questions, almost verging on the personal, but not meant to be so—again just a healthy interest.

Each summer the Folk Dance Group presents an outdoor folk dance festival, consisting of audience participation and exhibition dances by various nationality groups from all over Chicago. When these festivals were first given, most of the exhibition work was done by our own groups, but since the excellence of our programs has been widely broadcast by our audiences in the past year, and outside nationality groups have asked to be included in them, considering it an honor and a privilege, our own group contents itself by acting as host. But for some of us, the old days were the best. Through these festivals, the Folk Dance Group has been able to establish the Beliajus Room Scholarship Fund for the House. It also frequently entertains the House residents at folk dance parties.

This folk dancing activity has interested many people in the University of Chicago community, as well as elsewhere in the city. It has been the means of introducing many of our international students to fine Americans, fostering friendships which might otherwise have been impossible. For the House residents themselves folk dancing has many phases. For many it is complete relaxation; for some interested professionally in recreation it is a valuable addition to their academic work; for the students just coming from their homelands, it is a place where English is not important and where they can meet other students without the formality of introductions; for those who are shy, it is a chance to get into things—no wallflowers being permitted; and for the students who are a little short of funds, no “dates” are necessary—in fact, they are discouraged. It is interesting to watch some of the students during their first sessions. Some come once or twice, find a friend, and may never come again. They have found what they needed, companionship. Others come for the fun of dancing and the exhilaration it gives them. Some never learn the difference between a polka and a waltz, nor the difference between their right and left feet. Others come because

they are really interested in the dance and realize that no where else in Chicago, for that matter in the whole Middle West, can they learn the beauty and intricacies of folk dancing as it is taught at International House.

Over a period of eighteen years of happy dancing values more far reaching and lasting have been realized—a better understanding of the different peoples of the world, a more tolerant attitude toward the cultures of others, and a sincere and friendly interest in each other.



Viltis Flattered. Value of Folk Festival.

Vyts, this month's VILTIS was superb. I don't know how you manage with all the research that you must have to do, but the results are well worth reading... For a short while, I was attending all the functions described so well and it seemed I had only to step out my door to attend. I envy the people who can attend and participate in these programs.

The Folk Festival means so much to us out here in the wilderness, because it is about the only place we can catch glimpses of national dances as they should be done and try to remember a little gesture or a motion that helps to make these dances. Here in Colorado, I'm afraid to say, all the dances—Russian, Polish, and even your Lithuanian, have that peculiar Western flavor that chokes most of the authenticity from the dances.

Robert Allison, Denver, Colo.

We Strive To Give Only Authentic Material

I enjoyed so much your issue on Hungary. Those some of the information was already known to me, the accuracy and detail of your material (Thanks to Bettsource of my pleasure lay largely in noting once again ty Szekely—VFB)

Your use of the term “national costume” has, I think, clarified a point for me. My concern over predominance of the white voile skirts in this country for Polish and Hungarian costumes and their absence in costume pictures taken abroad, has stayed me from making a Hungarian costume, although my mother who came from Hungary as a child has told me that the white, ribbon-decorated skirt can be found in Hungary. My impression from your article is that the costume shown on the front of VILTIS is not sectional and has been adopted to represent Hungary, almost as a flag is adopted, (Yes ma'am, it is so).

Let me mention how much Bud and I enjoyed another dance session with you (in Buffalo, N. Y.). Others of our Cosmopolital Folk Dance group were there, too, and are so anxious for us to put on certain of the dances you taught—the hardest ones, no less. Up until then they hadn't the patience for dances which required a little concentration to learn. That night they evolved from beginners to ambitious dancers.

Betty Dambach, Buffalo, N. Y.

California In The News

Thank you, Vyts, for all the San Francisco information and news in VILTIS... we get more news from you than the local publications give us.

Virgil Morton, San Francisco, Cal.

ATEITIS

The St. Louis National Folk Festival this year was probably the best one yet. All of the groups that participated had something fine to contribute to the festival and our presence there rounded out our yearly program.

Yes Sir, St. Louis—“What a riot”—that's where everyone tries real hard to get some sleep in between the parties and performances.

But seriously all of the groups were wonderful to us and to each other. They friendly, gay and very complimentary. Yes, the people that participated in the festival are a grand bunch of kids; and the festival is truly a grand event.

Our concert this year was a success largely because of the type of program presented. A history of the Lithuanian dance was the theme of the program. These were over thirty dances in the program, each dance adding to the story in its own fashion. We would like to express our thanks to Mrs. Dauzvardis for her help in the program. The crown of a Queen to you Mrs. Dauzvardis, and Vyte we must not forget him—thanks friend.

In May we will participate in the “VILTIS” Festival, probably the finest festival of its kind in Chicago. Vyts always has a wonderful program.

Sunday April 16th the “Ateitis Dancers” went as a group to see the Ciurlionis Ensemble sing and dance at the Civic Opera House in Chicago. The Ateitis Dancers had a lot of praise for the program presented.

We are happy to have Vic Kaupas dancing with us, like the others in the Kaupas family, he too is a fine dancer.

Vic Kaupas and Ann Sereika danced with the French group in St. Louis—they did a wonderful job.

Doloris Srupsa and Eleanor Mellas should team up as a singing team, both have beautiful voices and sing together in a most complimentary tone.

Eleanor Mellas did it again—in competition she received the honor of “Spotlight Queen” for her school dance.

Al Gimbut is finally accepted into the “Mikita Club”—he fell during one of the practices, now he is one of the boys. Your in fella.

Be Seeing You.

Frank



IN PERPETUAL MEMORIAM

To Our Friends Who Died For Their Country
During World War II

Pat A. Arnold	Edward J. Pūckorius
Charles C. Contos	Charles A. Rudauskas
Henry Dutkiewicz	John Rukštala
Hugh M. Fraser	Jack Solomon
Ernest Barry Gaston	F. Parker Totten
James J. Leary	John Wasiliauskas
Stanley Papciak	Chester Wilczynski
	Bruno Zurawski